

# Communication and swallowing difficulties following stroke



**Every 10 minutes, an Australian suffers a stroke** – that's more than 60,000 strokes each year. In the next 10 years, it is estimated that more than half a million people will suffer a stroke, making it the leading cause of disability in Australia.

60% of people who have had a stroke will develop a swallowing difficulty (dysphagia), while around 20% will have difficulty using speech. A further 30% of all people who have had a stroke will have difficulty articulating ideas or comprehending written or spoken language (aphasia).

Speech pathologists work with people who have had a stroke and are experts in communication and swallowing problems. A speech pathologist will provide specialised therapy and advice regarding the best way to help recover from communication and/or swallowing impairments arising from a stroke and recovery can be greatly assisted by starting speech pathology rehabilitation as soon as possible.

Speech pathologists work with people who have had a stroke to manage some of the following conditions:

**Aphasia** is caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control language and can result in difficulty understanding what other people say, losing the meaning of words and difficulty recognising word sounds.

It can also be difficult for the person to express what they want to say or find words and they may get stuck on particular sounds. People with aphasia can also find it hard to interpret body language, read or write.

**Dyspraxia** means difficulty planning and coordinating the muscle movements needed to form speech sounds and words. It can be hard for

someone with dyspraxia to find the correct mouth position needed to make sounds, move smoothly between sounds and words or coordinate the muscle movements needed to chew and swallow.

**Dysarthria** is muscle weakness, paralysis or poor coordination of the breathing and speech muscles and can affect a person's speech volume or cause them to slur their speech.

**Dysphagia** is a difficulty swallowing, meaning someone has difficulty chewing food or keeping food/liquid in their mouth. Difficulty swallowing can lead to coughing and choking, which can lead to food collecting in the lungs (aspiration).

# Communication and swallowing difficulties following stroke

Cognitive or thinking difficulties may arise following stroke and can result in impaired memory, trouble understanding subtle language (like jokes or sarcasm) and reduced problem solving skills.

Families and friends can help someone who has had a stroke by:

- talking in short, clear sentences
- allowing the person extra time to speak, avoiding rushing or trying to complete the sentence for them
- encouraging the person to be as independent as possible, but assisting them if asked or required
- encouraging the person to communicate, even if this takes a long time
- being sensitive to a person's sense of loss and/or frustration

A stroke occurs when blood supply to the brain is interrupted. This can result in damage to affected parts of the brain and can lead to difficulty:

- understanding speech
- speaking
- reading
- writing
- understanding and using body language and gestures
- thinking clearly
- concentrating
- remembering
- socialising
- hearing
- swallowing

## How do I become a speech pathologist?

Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree. To find out more go to [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses)

## How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?

Go to [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.